

## Impact Statement

Sarah Kang, Grade 11.  
***An Unwavering Spirit***, 2024.  
Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches.  
Bergen County Academies, Leonia, NJ  
Unsung Hero: Autherine Lucy Foster

I am a strong believer in the notion that structural change is a key driver of progressivity in global societies. Living in the 21st century, a time of collectively heightened social awareness in addressing issues of racial discrimination and inequality, has shaped me into a politically driven teenager. Observing current and historical politics has only strengthened the idea that making progressive changes to a system's rules is the first step to changing a system as a whole—and thus, the mindsets of the people who operate under said system. This belief is what specifically sparked my interest in Autherine Lucy Foster out of a long list of other accomplished, impactful historical figures, as I felt that she perfectly embodied this notion. When first introduced to Foster, I was struck by her resolute commitment to furthering her education in the face of such constant discrimination. Her relentless and eventually successful fight for her rights deeply resonated with me, leading me to mentally connect her to other strong, black, female civil rights heroes that I had previously learned about, namely Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges. When starting my artwork, I hoped to convey the way in which Autherine Lucy Foster inspired me through her impact on the world that I live in.

I started researching Foster by reading and watching resources documenting her story. As I noticed familiar historical keywords like the Brown v. Board of Education decision and the NAACP appearing with greater frequency, I delved deeper into my research through reading about the Civil Rights Movement with the aim of immersing myself within the social realm of that time period and truly understanding where Foster fit in. My admiration for Autherine Lucy Foster only grew stronger over the course of my research, allowing me to fully grasp the bravery of her actions in the context of such an unashamedly segregated world that obstructed her every movement. Foster applied to the University of Alabama knowing that they did not accept African American students, refusing to conform to prejudiced rules that limited her capabilities. When the university revoked her admission, she devoted herself to legally challenging the university's decision until she eventually got accepted three years later—only to be met with violent, large-scale riots protesting her presence by hurling objects and verbalizing death threats and racial slurs at her. Foster's spirit did not falter in face of such adamant adversity—Foster went on to give social justice speeches across the nation before finally being allowed to re-enroll in and graduate from the University of Alabama. In my artwork, I wanted to clearly illustrate Foster's story and the growth and change it demonstrates, especially from those impacted by her activism. By emphasizing the unwavering bravery, relentless perseverance, and strength in her gracefulness that Autherine Lucy Foster so powerfully demonstrated throughout her lifetime, I aimed to successfully characterize her as the hero that she truly was.

My painting depicts a culmination of Autherine Lucy Foster's life, connecting her significant historic plight with the University of Alabama with more recent events, creating an optimistic glimpse of the future. To emphasize the contrast between Foster's past and present

circumstances, I bisected the background of the canvas into two halves, with the left half representing her past. I used a primarily dark, monochromatic color palette of blue-gray values to set the tone for this section, reinforcing the cold, unwelcoming setting of this time. A dim, contrasted representation of the formerly named Bibb Graves Hall looms over a bright figure of Foster's younger self, which is surrounded by a mob of white, male rioters hatefully gazing at her from behind. I chose to portray Foster as composed with papers in her arm, smiling amidst this terrorizing scene to illustrate her persevering bravery in her fight for her educational rights, whether it be within the violence of the university riots or the long-lasting legal battles that she led against the university. Serving as a symbol of adversity is a brick that a rioter threw at Foster's head, which I illustrated to be jumping from the "past" into the foreground representing the present, showing how historic issues like institutional racism are still present today. I painted a large, vibrant portrait of an older Autherine Lucy Foster giving a speech in the foreground, shrouded in a glowing yellow aura symbolizing optimism and hope. She is courageously smiling as she speaks into a microphone, drawing reference to her past in public speaking while simultaneously expressing her joy in the progressiveness of the present. To emphasize the momentous step forward in society that Foster's graduation signifies, I depicted her in graduation attire with a peony, a common graduation flower and symbol of prosperity, its petals swept away by the wind. In the right half of the canvas's background is a bright and colorful depiction of the renamed Bibb Graves Hall, now named the Autherine Lucy Hall in Foster's honor. The red ribbon shown throughout the painting represents one that Foster cut during the building's renaming ceremony, creating a conclusive tone of victory. In my opinion, the building truly encapsulates how Foster impacted the world around her, making a name for herself in a formerly aggressive space of pure discriminatory hatred.

Despite living in a world that was designed to extinguish her spirit, Autherine Lucy Foster never faltered in her belief that she too deserved rights. Observing how just one singular individual was able to so powerfully reshape the prejudiced community around her has strengthened my own personal beliefs in my ability to do the same. Following in Foster's footsteps, I aim to speak out to my community about the social injustice that she faced through utilizing social media to share my artwork and the message behind it to an expansive audience. I hope to present my artwork to younger students at the volunteer organization that I currently volunteer at, introducing them to Foster's story and her bravery, as well as letting them know that it is never impossible to make positive impacts of their own.